

## ***'I Felt Trapped': Sexual Abuse of Teens in the Military's J.R.O.T.C. Program***

Former students say military veterans who led J.R.O.T.C. classes in U.S. high schools fashioned themselves as mentors, then used their power to manipulate and abuse.

**By Mike Baker, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Ilana Marcus Photographs by Mary F. Calvert**

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PICAYUNE, Miss. — With the rifle skills she honed in the Mississippi backwoods, Victoria Bauer had a path to escape the trap of drugs and dead-end jobs she saw most everywhere around her. Her future was in the Marines, she decided, and she had an idea about how to get there.

Across the way from her freshman algebra class, Ms. Bauer approached Steve Hardin, the retired Navy intelligence officer who guided the high school's Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps, a leadership program sponsored by the U.S. military at high schools across the country. He welcomed her into the fold, she said, and seemed interested in how her family, which traced roots back to the Four Winds Cherokee of Louisiana, had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Soon, her 45-year-old J.R.O.T.C. instructor was messaging her on Snapchat late into the night, telling her that it would “drive the guys crazy” if she wore a “small bikini” during the trip to their next out-of-state shooting competition. Then one night in 2015 as he drove her home from rifle practice, she told investigators, Mr. Hardin pushed his hand into her pants and penetrated her with his fingers — the start of what she said was months of sexual assaults. Ms. Bauer, who was 15 at the time, feared that resisting him would jeopardize her shot at advancement through the J.R.O.T.C. ranks or a military career.

“I gave all the body-language signals that I didn't want it,” Ms. Bauer said in an interview. “I didn't feel like I had a choice.”

Victoria Bauer at age 16.

For more than a century, the J.R.O.T.C. program has sought to instill U.S. military values in American teenagers, with classes in thousands of public high schools that provide training in marksmanship, life skills, hierarchical discipline and military history. School officials endorse the classes, typically offered as electives during the regular school day, as a way to galvanize students who are struggling with direction and motivation.

But a New York Times investigation — which included an examination of thousands of court documents, investigative files and other records obtained through more than 150 public disclosure requests — has found that the program has repeatedly become a place where retired military officers prey on their teenage students.

In the past five years, The Times found, at least 33 J.R.O.T.C. instructors have been criminally charged with sexual misconduct involving students, far higher than the rate of civilian high school teachers in jurisdictions examined by The Times. Many others have been accused of misconduct but never charged.



"They gain your trust. They make you feel like family," said Ms. Bauer, who joined her school's J.R.O.T.C. program in the hopes of one day becoming a Marine.

The senior military veterans who make up the J.R.O.T.C. ranks are certified by the military but deploy to high school classrooms with little oversight and scant training for the actual work of being a teacher. Many states do not require J.R.O.T.C. instructors to have a college degree or a teaching certificate. Schools are expected to monitor the instructors and investigate complaints, but they have struggled to adequately oversee a program that largely operates on the fringes of their campuses.

Victims have reported sexual assaults in classrooms and supply closets, during field trips or on late-night rides home, sometimes committed after instructors plied students with alcohol or drugs. One former student said her instructor told her that sexual submission was expected of women in the military. A recent cadet in Tennessee said her J.R.O.T.C. instructor warned that he had the skills to kill her without a trace if she told anyone about their sexual encounters. In Missouri, a student said she was forced to kneel at her instructor's bedside, blindfolded, with a gun to her head.

The Times interviewed 13 victims, many of whom had strikingly similar stories: They were teenagers who came from disadvantaged backgrounds or who otherwise saw the military as a pathway to a promising future, then found that the instructors who fashioned themselves as mentors exploited their positions to manipulate and abuse.

J.R.O.T.C. leaders declined requests for interviews but pointed to research indicating that the program had a positive effect on school attendance and graduation rates. The U.S. Army Cadet Command, which sponsors the largest J.R.O.T.C. program, said in a statement that its instructors went through a "strenuous" vetting process and that any allegations of misconduct were investigated, typically by the school districts that hired the J.R.O.T.C. instructors as civilian employees.

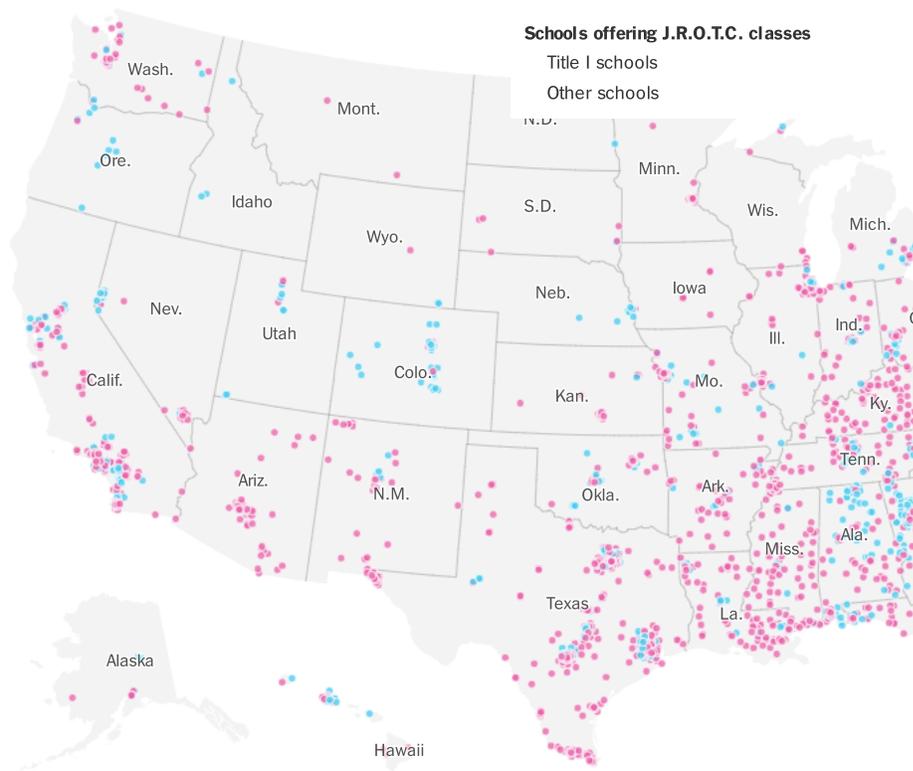
Founded during World War I, the J.R.O.T.C. program has grown to serve a half-million teenagers each year in classes aimed at promoting civic responsibility, leadership and skills such as handling a weapon. Its instructors are retired officers or noncommissioned officers, often holding medals from decades of military service.

For the military, which has struggled to meet its recruiting goals in an all-volunteer Army, J.R.O.T.C. has also been seen as a potentially important recruiting tool; students from high schools with J.R.O.T.C. programs are more than twice as likely to enlist after graduation, according to the Army Cadet Command.

The program targets schools with high populations of low-income students. Across the country, majority-minority schools are nearly three times as likely as majority-white schools to have a J.R.O.T.C. program, according to a Times analysis.

### The J.R.O.T.C. Program Often Targets High-Poverty Schools

About 70 percent of the schools that offer J.R.O.T.C. classes are eligible to receive federal funding under the Title I program, which aids schools with a high concentration of students from low-income families.



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics; J.R.O.T.C. websites • By Christine Zhang

The nature of the program offers instructors an unusual level of access to the children they mentor, according to interviews with former students and instructors. It often operates with its own classrooms and facilities, and students frequently are asked to participate in after-school, weekend and out-of-state activities, where instructors sometimes violate district rules by communicating with students on personal cellphones or driving them in their own vehicles.

The weak oversight has allowed some instructors to engage in repeated misconduct. At least seven of those who have been criminally charged had already been flagged for previous allegations of misconduct but were allowed to stay on the job.

Many of the instructors charged with sexual misconduct have pleaded guilty, although Mr. Hardin contested the sexual battery charges against him and eventually entered a no-contest plea to an unrelated charge that did not involve sexual misconduct but effectively barred him from working as a teacher. None of the instructors connected with the abuse described in this article or their lawyers agreed to be interviewed.

From left: Michael Bass, pleaded guilty to aggravated statutory rape; Brad Gibson, pleaded guilty to indecent liberties; Hosea McGhee, pleaded guilty to molestation and solicitation; Christopher Vlangas, pleaded guilty to statutory rape.

“There’s so much faith and confidence and trust that goes into these instructor positions,” said Joe Williams, a former Marine gunnery sergeant who worked as a J.R.O.T.C. instructor in Mississippi and Kansas for six years, and who was the first to raise concerns about Mr. Hardin with school administrators. “We’ve got these individuals who use that trust as a cloak.”

## **‘I felt trapped’**

When she came forward with allegations against her Air Force J.R.O.T.C. instructor in Charlotte, N.C., Dominique Mixon wondered whether anyone would believe her.

The instructor, Brad Gibson, had a catalog of medals and ribbons earned over 24 years of service. After retiring from active duty, he was hired to lead the military program at his alma mater, Independence High School — “Home of the Patriots.”

Ms. Mixon had joined J.R.O.T.C. as a freshman, hoping to go all four years and pursue a possible career in the Air Force. Mr. Gibson, then 44, had at first been a friendly mentor, but at times became flirtatious, Ms. Mixon told investigators in 2010.

Dominique Mixon at age 17.

Then, as she was working on an assignment alone at the back of the J.R.O.T.C. complex one day, she said, he came up next to her and began rubbing her thigh. He next moved his hand up her shirt, kissed her neck and licked her ears, Ms. Mixon reported. He told her he had been having “nasty” thoughts about her, she said.

She reported the incident within days to a teacher, who referred her to a campus police officer. But her report went nowhere.

A school administrator told police investigators that Mr. Gibson had previously been counseled for “borderline inappropriate behavior with his female students,” records say, but he was allowed to continue leading the J.R.O.T.C. program.

A J.R.O.T.C. group marching in a Veterans Day parade in November. In J.R.O.T.C. classrooms, instructors are not just teachers, they are superior officers. Abuse victims say the power dynamics in the program make it more difficult to resist sexual assaults.

It was Ms. Mixon who was pushed out of the program. She recalled being forced to sit alone in an office during fourth period, rather than attend her J.R.O.T.C. class.

"I felt trapped," Ms. Mixon said. "I felt alone in a corner. I felt like it was just me, myself and I."

That spring, she said, Mr. Gibson chaperoned her prom.

Eight years later, long after she had graduated, Ms. Mixon got a call from a Charlotte police officer: A 16-year-old student had filed a new report about Mr. Gibson.

It was a familiar story: Mr. Gibson, the girl reported to the police, had at first offered friendly hugs and made comments about her looks; then, when they were alone in a room one day during her sophomore year, he put his hand up her shirt. Another time, she told the police, he told her he had been thinking about her when he masturbated. The groping, she said, persisted for months.

The 2018 allegations led the authorities to reopen Ms. Mixon's case. Two years ago, Mr. Gibson pleaded guilty to indecent liberties with both girls. He was sentenced to five years of probation and required to register as a sex offender.

The school district declined to comment about the case, citing personnel confidentiality. Mr. Gibson did not respond to a message seeking comment.

Dominique Mixon, left, met with a young woman who was abused by the same instructor. "I was looking for a role model, but not someone who would overstep the boundaries and take advantage of me," Ms. Mixon said.

Records released under public disclosure laws show cases across the country in which J.R.O.T.C. instructors who wound up being criminally charged had been the subject of complaints from students in the past, including in Chicago; Casa Grande, Ariz.; and Mandeville, La. In the Louisiana case, court and deposition transcripts show, school officials reported that they had initially vetted an anonymous complaint of potential sexual abuse, in part by consulting the instructor's J.R.O.T.C. superior, who vouched that the allegations were implausible because the instructor was "a full-tilt Marine."

Months later, Capt. Kevin Covert, a police investigator in Mandeville, reviewed text messages exchanged between students and the instructor, Hosea McGhee, and concluded that the 48-year-old instructor had been abusing not just one, but two students, sometimes several times a day throughout school hours. In a deposition, Captain Covert said he was left wondering how the abuse could have been going on so blatantly with school administrators seemingly unaware.

“These girls would leave class and go be with him in the R.O.T.C. room,” he said. “Which begged the question for me: How are more people not seeing this?”

Mr. McGhee pleaded guilty to charges of molestation and solicitation for his conduct with the two girls and was sentenced to five years in prison.

In the case of Ms. Bauer in Mississippi, other concerns about Mr. Hardin’s conduct had emerged months before she came forward.

Mr. Williams, the J.R.O.T.C. instructor who reported him, recalled in an interview that Mr. Hardin had made a lewd comment to him about a student in a bikini. Then, when some students came to him with a report that they had seen several concerning text messages that Mr. Hardin had sent to a female student, Mr. Williams said, he brought the issue to school administrators.

A text message exchange between Ms. Bauer and Steve Hardin, her J.R.O.T.C. instructor:

But he said he faced intense blowback. One of the longtime leaders in the school’s J.R.O.T.C. program, he recalled, accused him of failing to follow the chain of command by going to administrators instead of trying to resolve the complaints with Mr. Hardin directly.

School officials did not respond to requests to discuss the case. But court records show that a police investigation ensued. Ms. Bauer initially defended him, saying in a recent interview that she did not disclose her encounters with Mr. Hardin at the time because she feared she would be ostracized.

Mr. Hardin was not charged at the time, and wound up applying for a new role at a J.R.O.T.C. program two hours away from Picayune.

He got the job.

## **A source of pride, but no oversight**

J.R.O.T.C. classes are built around military-style discipline, typically starting with the Pledge of Allegiance. Students learn public speaking, a U.S. military view of world history and how to march in formation. On designated days, cadets dress in service uniforms, and when visitors come to class, the students stand at attention.

The military provides instructors with training in ethics and the J.R.O.T.C. curriculum, then certifies them to be hired by school districts. Part of their pay is reimbursed by the military, which conducts annual reviews of school J.R.O.T.C. programs, usually looking at such things as the effectiveness of programs and the condition of facilities.

James Boyer, a retired Navy captain who led the J.R.O.T.C. program at a high school north of Houston for nearly two decades, said many instructors became father figures for students, helping them apply for scholarships and get jobs, or pushing them to improve their grades. He recalled speaking to car dealerships to help one of his students get a job after she showed an interest in cars. Sometimes, he said, a student who had a chaotic home life would do homework for another class in his office.

“The instructors generally are different than your standard teachers,” Mr. Boyer said. “They may be fantastic and they may be not — everywhere you go there’s a bad apple doing something stupid — but for the most part they’re getting to know these kids in a way that the vast majority of other teachers are not.”

For a position that provides them an unusual level of access to students, J.R.O.T.C. instructors have minimal training obligations. Mr. Williams described going through a two-week military training course in California to become a qualified instructor, with much of the time focused on the administrative functions of the job, such as how to balance the books and order supplies, and only a brief discussion of teacher-student boundaries.

“I still remember what the instructor said. He’s like: ‘You can’t fall in love with a 15-year-old,’” Mr. Williams said.

Many states allow J.R.O.T.C. instructors to get a license with little more than a high school diploma. Sixteen states, The Times found, do not require them to have state certification at all, including Florida, which has more J.R.O.T.C. programs than any other state but Texas.

The military gives a seal of approval to each instructor but takes a largely hands-off approach to oversight, leaving school districts to watch for any problems.

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Veronica Garcia, the former superintendent of schools in Santa Fe, N.M., said the program could be difficult for schools to fully monitor, with students doing J.R.O.T.C. activities before or after school, and often traveling to competitions with their instructors outside of school hours.

In 2019, three students came forward to law enforcement to complain about inappropriate comments and touches from Dale Mayes, a J.R.O.T.C. instructor in Ms. Garcia's district who had previously spent more than 30 years in the Navy. District records show that school officials did their own internal review, finding the allegations to be credible and contacting the state Public Education Department, which certifies teachers and investigates misconduct.

But the state said it had no jurisdiction to intervene because New Mexico did not license J.R.O.T.C. instructors.

Ms. Garcia told the state agency that this had created a "troubling loophole," according to correspondence released under the state public records act.

Mr. Mayes, who declined to comment for this article, was charged with one count of criminal sexual misconduct with a minor, though his lawyer told the court that the instructor had "a strong case for innocence." The case was later dropped, with prosecutors saying there was insufficient evidence to pursue the case.

The school district, on the other hand, ultimately averted a lawsuit by agreeing to pay about half a million dollars to three students who said Mr. Mayes acted improperly.

## **Obedience comes first**

In J.R.O.T.C. classrooms, instructors are not just teachers. They are superior officers, and students are taught to follow the chain of command.

"Obedience is the first lesson every military person must learn," one of the program's textbooks says.

Abuse victims said the power dynamics in the program made it more difficult to resist sexual assaults.

One of them, Jordan Leloup, came from a troubled childhood of poverty and drugs in Tennessee and no longer had a relationship with her parents. She said she yearned for something akin to "family."

Jordan Leloup around age 16.

When the J.R.O.T.C. instructor, Michael Bass, approached her one day during the 2013-14 school year about joining the program at Hendersonville High School, she said, he had an appealing sales pitch. “We are like family,” he told her.

After she joined, Mr. Bass, who was 44, invited her for dinners at his home, where she would socialize with his wife and children. Then one night, she said, she arrived to find herself alone with Mr. Bass, who had set two places at the table, with wine. He later took her to an upstairs room, where the first sexual assault occurred. She was 17.

After that, she said, Mr. Bass would tell her nearly every day where to meet him privately — sometimes in a storage room at school or in an office, where he would lock a metal door. When she began to express reluctance, she said, he pressured her.

“Any time he told me to be ready or meet him somewhere, I had to be there,” she said. “If I didn’t, there would be consequences.”

One night when she threatened to tell the police about the relationship, she said, Mr. Bass insinuated that his time in the military had given him the skills that would allow him to kill her without anyone knowing.

Ms. Leloup eventually did go to the police, who charged Mr. Bass, citing a recorded conversation in which he acknowledged a sexual relationship. He pleaded guilty to two counts of aggravated statutory rape in 2019 and was sentenced to four years in prison.

“I came from nothing. I came from dirt poor,” Ms. Leloup said. “I looked at it like, ‘I have to do what this man tells me to do, because he is offering the world.’”

It was not the only case to involve overt threats. In Mountain Grove, Mo., two teenagers, one of them who had been just 14, reported persistent abuse by the J.R.O.T.C. instructor, David Russell Long, that involved knives, hot wax, bags over their heads and being tied to a bed. One of them told the police that Mr. Long, who was 52 when the assaults began, once blindfolded her, directed her to kneel at his bedside and put a gun to her head, according to a police affidavit filed with the court.

Mr. Long pleaded guilty to two counts of assault for grazing the girls’ bodies with a knife and a count of endangering the welfare of a child. He was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

With at least 33 instructors charged with teacher-student sexual crimes in the past five years, the J.R.O.T.C. program has recorded one arrest for every 232 instructor positions. There is no national tracking system for educator abuse, but The Times reviewed arrest information for high school teachers released by three of the nation’s largest school districts — Miami-Dade County, Fla., Hillsborough County, Fla., and Los Angeles — along with five years of disciplinary records in Pennsylvania, which proactively monitors for teacher arrests.

Compared with each of those jurisdictions, the J.R.O.T.C. program recorded teacher-student sexual misconduct charges much more often — 68 percent higher than the next highest case rate.

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What was your experience with J.R.O.T.C.? \*

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## ‘Ruined everything’

Former J.R.O.T.C. students who were victimized say they have faced years of struggle to get their lives back on track. One says she sometimes goes into a closet to scream where no one will hear her. Another said she broke down at her job at Wendy’s when someone in military-style fatigues entered the restaurant.

Jacey Antokoletz, 23, said the abuse she endured as a high school junior in Brewster, N.Y., left her dreading sleep because of recurring nightmares about her J.R.O.T.C. instructor, Christopher Vlangas.

Jacey Antokoletz at age 16.

For a time, Ms. Antokoletz had viewed the relationship as consensual, even writing a letter in support of him after he was arrested on charges of abusing a different student. Ms. Antokoletz said it was only then, after meeting with a prosecutor who explained how adults can target and manipulate children, that she started to see that Mr. Vlangas had abused her, too.

Ms. Antokoletz, who now has a child with her fiancé, fears that her young daughter might misinterpret her skittishness around men, including those closest to her.

“If I flinch at something or I just don’t want to be touched and she sees that, she sees like, ‘Oh, what is Daddy doing to Mommy?’” Ms. Antokoletz said.

Mr. Vlangas pleaded guilty to a statutory rape charge involving the other student and was sentenced to six months in jail. Ms. Antokoletz and the other student recently settled a lawsuit against Mr. Vlangas and the school district.

“I work two jobs and go to school full time, because if I didn’t have those things, it would give me more time to think about it a lot and I don’t want to think about it,” Ms. Antokoletz said.

Some victims have seen their cherished aspirations of a career in the military disrupted.

One of them, a young woman in Florida, said she had enrolled in the program as a high school freshman, hoping it would help her fulfill her ambition to join the Coast Guard.

But by her junior year, the instructor, Bryan Teet, who was then 47, started making comments about her looks and giving gifts, she said, then went further for the first time when he drove her home one day.

A jury convicted Mr. Teet on a charge of sexual battery by a custodial authority last year. Then, in April, an appeals court reversed the conviction, saying that Mr. Teet was not a “custodial authority” at the time of the alleged abuse because it occurred outside of his school duties. The case might have had a different outcome had the state filed a different criminal charge, the judges wrote. The state has appealed to the Florida Supreme Court.

During one of the court hearings, the victim told the judge that her years in J.R.O.T.C. had destroyed her life.

Now 21, she fought back tears as she described spending much of her senior year alone in her room. The independence and fearlessness she had cherished were gone.

“Mr. Teet’s actions ruined everything for me — my past, my present and my future,” she told the court.

“I do not want this to happen to another child,” said a woman from Florida, who joined the J.R.O.T.C. program at her school to try to get into the Coast Guard.

After graduation, she applied to enter the Coast Guard, but when she drove to the military processing center in Tampa, she said in an interview, she was told that the Coast Guard could not accept her because of indications of lingering trauma from abuse. (The Coast Guard said in a statement that she had been rejected for “medical conditions.”)

She made the 90-minute drive home alone, crying.

## No prison time

Ms. Bauer, the young woman from Mississippi who had hoped to go into the Marine Corps, said that Mr. Hardin continued to pursue sexual encounters with her for several months after he transferred to the new job at another school district. He would ask her to meet, she said, and gradually she began to realize that she no longer needed to respond.

She eventually told her mother, and then the police. Mr. Hardin was charged in 2017 with six counts of sexual battery.

He eventually pleaded no contest to a lesser crime, contributing to the abuse or neglect of a child, in which he did not admit any sexual misconduct but said he had failed to notify the authorities about unrelated possible abuse or neglect that Ms. Bauer suffered at home. One judge rejected the plea arrangement. A second judge also balked, saying it did not address the issues raised in the charges against Mr. Hardin. Defense lawyers eventually won a hearing before a third judge, who accepted the deal.

Hal Kittrell, the district attorney in the case, said prosecutors always believed Ms. Bauer but had to consider the likelihood of winning the case, including whose testimony jurors would be more likely to believe and how they would weigh the fact that Ms. Bauer had initially defended Mr. Hardin, something he said was not uncommon for victims of abuse.

Prosecutors agreed to the plea because it gave Mr. Hardin a felony record and barred him from working as a teacher, Mr. Kittrell said.

Mr. Hardin declined an interview but emphasized in a brief conversation that the original charges against him had been dropped.

Ms. Bauer has been trying to put the painful episode behind her. In the middle of it, at age 17, she had carved words into her leg: “Useless” and “Whore.” The scars lingered for years.

But a couple of years ago, when she turned 20, she got a tattoo on her thigh, an image that harnessed her Native American heritage and covered over the scars. It was a raven, an emblem of rebirth.

She said the experience forever changed her view of men, the justice system, schools and the military.

“The people who are supposed to be out protecting our country, do they really protect their own people?” Ms. Bauer said.

She never joined the Marines.

Ms. Bauer at home with her partner.

### **Methodology**

The locations of public high schools with J.R.O.T.C. programs come from the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy websites. The Times joined this data with federal Education Department data that includes each school's racial demographics and the school's eligibility for Title I funding.

The data set of public high schools includes those in the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, including the Bureau of Indian Education, that go up to at least the 10th grade, as of the 2019-2020 academic year. The analysis does not include J.R.O.T.C. programs located at private schools, schools on U.S. territories or schools on international military bases.